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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000047

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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ EXPLOITS FARC HOSTAGE RELEASE

REF: BOGOTA 00129

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

1. (C) Summary. President Chavez is trying to extract maximum political advantage from the January 10 release of FARC-held hostages Clara Rojas and Consuelo Gonzalez de Perdomo. He personally met the freed hostages and their families at his Miraflores presidential palace hours after their release. The Venezuelan government required all local television stations to broadcast the brief welcoming ceremony on the steps of Miraflores. Earlier the same day, Interior and Justice Minister Ramon Rodriguez Chacin accompanied both FARC-held hostages back to Venezuela and paraded them off the Venezuelan helicopters (flying under ICRC markings) before the assembled media. Chavez told the media January 9 that he does not plan to speak directly with Colombian President Uribe, but still wants to assist with additional hostage releases and to speak personally with FARC leader Marulanda. He also dwelled on the hostage release during his January 10 State-of-the-Nation address, insisting that the FARC and ELN are not terrorist groups. End Summary.

Presidential Welcome

2. (SBU) A beaming President Chavez and his honor guard met recovered FARC-held hostages Clara Rojas and Consuelo Gonzalez de Perdomo, Colombian Senator Piedad Cordoba, and family members of the hostages on the red carpeted steps of Miraflores the evening of January 10, hours after their release. Chavez invited the group to pose around him for assembled photographers. In addition, the Venezuelan government required all local television networks to broadcast a welcome ceremony in which a small military band played the Venezuelan and Colombian national anthems. Chavez then escorted the group into Miraflores for a private meeting.

3. (SBU) Chavez used the release to reiterate to the media that he does not intend to speak with Colombian President Uribe. Nevertheless, the Venezuelan president expressed continued interest in mediating further FARC hostage releases and in promoting a peace process in Colombia. He once again urged the Colombian government to concede to a demilitarized zone and reiterated his interest in meeting with FARC leader Marulanda. According to local media reports, the released hostages carried proof of life of some ten other FARC hostages.

14. (SBU) Chavez also spoke at length about his "personal commitment" in promoting peace in Colombia at the top of his January 10 State-of-the-Nation televised address in the National Assembly as the "first step in the resurrection of Greater Colombia." He thanked President Uribe for expressing appreciation for his efforts in the January 9 release, but reiterated his criticism of the Colombian government for terminating his mediation efforts in late 2007. To loud applause among National Assembly members, Chavez insisted that the FARC and ELN are not terrorist groups. At the end of his speech, Chavez projected Telesur images of the release of the hostages in the jungle and reiterated that he considers the FARC "an army."

The Recovery Mission

15. (SBU) Earlier the same day, Chavez informed the media of the recovery, noting that newly-re-appointed Justice and Interior Minister Ramon Rodriguez Chacin had assured him by phone that Rojas and Gonzalez de Perdomo had been freed and were being transported back to Venezuela. Chacin was accompanied in the recovery by Colombian Senator Piedad Cordoba and the Cuban Ambassador in Venezuela. With both arms tightly wrapped around the shoulders of the hostages, the red-shirted Rodriguez Chacin paraded the hostages off the helicopters toward the assembled media. Chavez reportedly told the hostages that they could remain in Venezuela as long as they liked and, if they wanted, medical attention in Cuba could be arranged.

Domestic Spin

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16. (SBU) In comments to the media on January 10, Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro distinguished between "political" prisoners and "economic" prisoners of the FARC. He said Venezuelans taken hostage by the FARC are "economic" prisoners and part of the problem. Without citing specifics, Maduro insisted that the Venezuelan government is making efforts to secure the release of both types of hostages. National Assembly President Cilia Flores welcomed President Chavez to the National Assembly January 10 for his State-of-the-Nation address by publicly commending his role in the January 9 FARC hostage release.

Comment

17. (C) President Chavez is trying to extract maximum political benefits from his ostensible role in the January 9 release of two FARC hostages, particularly in the wake of the media circus that surrounded his unsuccessful earlier efforts to do the same. The Venezuelan government carefully staged the media events surrounding the release to maximize both the international and domestic political benefits. We expect Chavez to continue to try to play a prominent role in FARC-related negotiations in order to burnish his international image. Given his open alignment with FARC and continued criticism of the Colombian government, the Venezuelan president is not likely to be a very effective mediator, however. To the extent he is frustrated in future "humanitarian" efforts in Colombia, we expect Chavez to continue to blame the Colombian government.

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